

December 4, 2011
Second Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 40: 1-11
Mark 1: 1-8

"Prepare Ye a Place"

Have you ever noticed how "suddenly" John the baptizer appeared on the stage of history ... out in the Judean wilderness, the desert, that rugged, barren place where no one would rightly go, unless it was a Scoutmaster with a troop of boy scouts, hungry to earn the Eagle rank? But there he was, John the baptizer, himself as rough and rugged as the wilderness where he preached; clothed in camel's hair, a leather belt around his waist, living off locusts and wild honey. John was a prophet ... a preacher ... a man called by God precisely to go out into the wilderness where the constant distractions of blazing lights, and the endless verses of Christmas songs, the great deals of Black Friday and Cyber Monday are peeled away, ...a place where people are, at a point where they are forced to confront their true selves and ask the question: "Is there really a God?" Into this wilderness God sent John to proclaim the Advent of the Kingdom of God; baptizing people, warning people, rousing them to be ready ... to prepare themselves for this new thing God is about to do in the world. And since that time, the world has never been the same.

John is a very mysterious person in Mark's Gospel. We are told next to nothing about him. We are told nothing about his personal religious experience, how he came to his faith ... as over against St. Paul who wanted all of us to know what happened to him on the Road to Damascus. John is just all of a sudden there, preaching, baptizing ... and we are told, "... the people from the whole Judean countryside, and ALL the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, confessing their sins, turning back to God, and being baptized by him in the River Jordan, a sign of their passage over into a new way of life. How can one man have such a powerful message? How did he come to know what God was about to do? How did he know the Kingdom of God was coming, ...and coming soon? How did he know that God's Kingdom would demand a response from us, built upon those twin pillars of repentance and the forgiveness of sins? How did he know the Messiah, long expected by generations of people, was about to come? We are not told. He is just all of a sudden there, making the announcement, putting it out there for all to hear and believe, ...or not.

This scene of John and his disciples down at the Jordan River, baptizing hundreds, if not thousands of people, brings to mind a

revival that took place somewhere down near Orlando, Florida about four years ago, just before I came to Florence. I was part of the Hogansville Ministerial Association, a wonderful and diverse group of ministers, all of whom, shall I say, being cut out of a different bolt of cloth than I. Nevertheless, I rarely missed a meeting. One morning several of the ministers came in all excited about this revival that had been on-going, 24 hours a day for going on six weeks down I the Wilderness of Florida, and why couldn't this happen here in West Georgia? Heading up this revival was a dynamic, new, young evangelist who was baptizing thousands of new converts to the faith; healing hundreds of all kinds of infirmities.

Always intrigued by scenes like this, I viewed some YouTube videos of the revival just to see what all the hoopla was about. Indeed, it was a site to see. At one service, the young preacher, adorned with long, wooly hair, a short unkempt beard, dressed in jeans, sandals and a T-shirt, was standing down in front of the chancel (understood as stage) with a large Tarpon Springs sponge in his hand, and an assistant at his side holding a bucket of water. He invited everyone to "come on down and get the Spirit!" "Come on down and get you some!" he shouted out. "God wants you to have it, ...and it's free!" The mob was huge, ...people packed in that large main aisle, and when they got to the preacher, he would take that soaked sponge and whack it on everybody, one after the other ... "Come on and get it! It's God's gift for you, and it's free for everyone!" Who can argue with that message?

Now this young man was no John the Baptist, but the whole event does reveal how hungry virtually all people in the Judean and American country sides are for something new, ...some Good News, ...something that can and will transform their lives and fill them with hope and meaning for the future. I believe this reality, this desire for spiritual renewal is no less true for all of us as well.

Something happened to John. Before Jesus went to John to be baptized, John clearly already knew that God's Kingdom was about to come with power and glory, and that the Messiah was about to appear; as John said, the "One who would be more powerful than he; the One whose shoes he was not fit to untie; the One who would come after him, baptizing with Holy Spirit."

We are not told how John came to know this. Perhaps that is not important. He did, however, understand his role as being that of preparing the way for that which was about to come after himself. "Repent; Confess your sins; turn your lives and your hearts back to God; Believe! I baptize you with water, a sign of your desire to give your life to God. But the One coming after me will seal God's new covenant upon your hearts with Holy Spirit. He's coming! Make ready. Prepare the way. Prepare ye a place in your hearts."

So, how do we do that? Well, first of all let me say that though there is so much more each and all of us can do, and should be doing to prepare even a larger place in our hearts for the Messiah who is coming to us, even sooner now than when we were gathered here last week to worship together, ...the truth is that God has already got our ears. We are the choir. We should be grateful, and celebrate that! Advent, however, is truly for those who have never before heard about what God is doing. Advent is a call to the human race to wake up and smell the gospel coffee. Advent is, yet one more time, a call to those who have never before heard the gospel, and, as one dear soul so beautifully put it, an appeal to those have heard the stories, but never got the message.

At Christmas, the Christ Child is looking for a place to be born in every human heart. Christmas isn't about how many gifts we give or how many gifts we receive. Advent it is about heeding John's message to prepare a way for that which is coming, the Son of God. Christmas is about preparing a place for mother, child and father who, finding no room in the inn, have no place to stay, ...no place to be born.

There is a deep sense of urgency in John's voice. It is very similar to the urgency we hear in Isaiah's voice. We can't wait. It is a very risky thing to put off preparing a way, ...preparing a place in our hearts for the coming of the Lord. Christmas will be here before we know it, and I'm not talking about December 25th! Isaiah, as quoted by Mark, pleaded with his people:

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
Who will prepare your way;
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
Make his paths straight.'"

(Mark 1:2-3)

The Advent messages in all our lessons this morning, point to the same responses on our parts, and all carry a similar sense of urgency. If you hear anything about what God is doing in the world today; if you believe anything about the promises of the Kingdom of God, don't allow yourself to hesitate in responding. Prepare a way for the coming of the Lord. Prepare places in your hearts for the birth of the Child who is coming; prepare places where He might dwell throughout your entire life. We are all preparing our homes for the coming of Christmas, are we not? How much more important it is for us to prepare our hearts.

How are we to do that, you ask? We do that by listening to what John is telling us. We prepare our hearts by doing just what John has told us: repent; turn back to God; confess your sins; come together as God's people to worship God, to pray together, to serve others. Come to this table. Let yourselves receive the grace God is offering each and all of us. These are the things we can do to prepare the way for the coming of the Christ child.

As I have said, this message is clearly most urgent for those who have no room in their hearts where the Child might be born, because their hearts are jam packed with worldly concerns and the desires of this world. This is when we take up John's message with our own voices, we ourselves being the voices calling out in the wilderness, proclaiming the Good News of Advent, the coming of our Lord and our King. So many people have yet to hear. So many souls are yet to be baptized. Perhaps it is time for a worldwide revival. "Come on down, everyone! Come and get you some! There is more than enough for all. It will never run out, and it is free for all who come."

What does "that way" and "that place" we are called to prepare look like in real terms in the life of a person who eagerly anticipates the coming of the Lord? I turn your attention to this Advent Wreath and the gifts of the Spirit it heralds during this season: Hearts filled with Hope, Peace, Joy and Love ... hearts that are reflective of the very heart of Christ, the One whose coming John announces. Let me close with a story that tells of one man's heart that was filled with the Peace of Christ, the Advent gift we celebrate today.

When I lived in Hogansville, I came to know one of the kindest, most decent people any of us will ever have the privilege to know, Hub Griffith, a man about 80 years of age. Hub was a member of the First

United Methodist Church, so I didn't necessarily see him even every week. But he was my neighbor. I would pass by his house every time I drove to work. Sometimes I would stop and visit with him. I came to know him by seeing him frequently around town. I am not sure why we liked each other as much as we did. He was clearly a man of faith, a man committed to his church, a man alive in the Spirit of God.

One day, driving to work, I saw Hub out in his yard near the street, raking leaves. I stopped, and, just to touch base, I shouted out, "Hey, Hub!" Hub came over to the car, rake in hand, and leaned into the passenger side window. We chatted for a minute about whatever. Then Hub said, turning serious, "Richard, I want to tell you about something. I went to the doctor yesterday, and he told me I have lung cancer."

I was stunned! I had no idea Hub even had any health problems. He seemed fine. He continued, "This is it. It's bad. I don't have long." I said, "Hub, I'm in shock. I don't know what to say. I am so sorry."

He said, "It'll be okay. I'm not afraid. God will see me through." Hub was calm; he was strong; he had a sweet smile on his face; He knew that God would "see him through" ... I could tell. As I drove off, I looked in my rear view mirror to see Hub returning to doing what he loved most, being outside, in his yard, raking leaves. Throughout the rest of that day, I worked hard to take in what Hub had just told me, and as I did so, my mind kept going back to the words that our Lord Jesus spoke to His disciples at the Last Supper:

"Peace I leave with you;
My peace I give to you.
I do not give as the world gives.
Do not let your hearts be troubled,
and do not let them be afraid."

That may have been the last time I ever saw Hub. How does one get to that place where Hub had arrived in his faith? I'm not totally sure. But I am sure it has something to do with Advent ... turning toward God, surrendering our lives, and opening our hearts to prepare a place where the Christ Child can enter in and be born anew this day.